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ABSTRACT

The Metropolitan Achievement Test scores for Boston, Massachusetts, have improved from 1987 to 1988, with scores for 8 grades matching or exceeding the 50th percentile as established in 1986. Reading scores improved over the previous year in seven grades. Yet this "good news" provides little information about real reading skills or achievement patterns of students in the Boston Public Schools. Closer analysis of Boston's reading test scores suggests the following: (1) differences in scores between White students and those of Black, Hispanic and Asian students increase as students progress from one year to the next; (2) wide differences in scores between White, Black, and Hispanic students grew even wider between 1987 and 1988; (3) the longer Black, Asian, and Hispanic students remain in the Boston Public Schools, the higher their chances of scoring in the bottom 40th percentile on Metropolitan reading tests; (4) Boston is seriously misusing test score data for policy purposes, particularly in ranking schools; (5) remediation efforts are little more than test preparation classes--the resulting rise in test scores is achieved at significant cost, both in financial terms and in terms of time robbed from real reading instruction; and (6) current reporting of test scores provides no information about what really happens to individual students over time, suggesting that the data is used primarily for public relations purposes, not for identifying the needs of individual students. Recommendations are offered. Data are presented on seven tables and figures. Notes are included. (BJV)

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Status Report, The Way Out
Test Score Patterns and Reading in Boston Public Schools

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STATUS REPORT

The Way Out:
Test Score Patterns and Reading
in Boston Public Schools

September 1988

Boston's Metropolitan Achievement Test scores in reading have improved from 1987 to 1988, with scores for eight grades matching or exceeding the fiftieth percentile as established in 1986. Reading scores improved over the previous year in seven grades, remained at 1987 levels in three grades, and dropped in two grades.

Yet this "good news" provides little information about real reading skills or achievement patterns of students in Boston Public Schools. In fact, an in-depth examination of these patterns actually sends mixed signals regarding the reading ability of Boston's students and suggests that Boston has gained higher test scores at significant cost.

Closer analysis of Boston's reading test scores suggests:

- Difference in scores between white students and those of black, Hispanic, and Asian students increase as students progress from one year to the next;
- Wide differences in scores between white

students and between black and Hispanic students grew even wider between 1987 and 1988;

- The longer black, Hispanic, and Asian students remain in Boston Public schools, the higher their chances of scoring in the bottom 40th percentile on Metropolitan reading tests; at the same time, their chances for scoring in the top 40th percentile decrease.

Moreover, a review of the literature on standardized testing and interviews with students across the city indicates that:

- Boston is seriously misusing test score data for policy purposes, particularly in ranking schools;
- Remediation efforts are little more than test preparation classes with the resulting rise in test scores achieved at significant cost, both in financial terms and in terms of time robbed from real reading instruction;
- Current reporting of test scores provides no information about what really happens to individual students over time, suggesting that the use of data to identify the needs of individual students is secondary to the use of test scores for public relations purposes.

This *STATUS REPORT* will examine these findings in detail and will make recommendations regarding policies related to test scores and reading in Boston Public Schools.

Inside:

Boston Test Scores: Major Findings
What Test Scores Really Say About Reading
Test Scores and School Rankings
Testing and the Curriculum
Recommendations for Change
and more...

Reading Scores in Boston:

Major Findings

1. *Improvements for the system overall mask significant differences in scores for different groups.*

While Boston Public Schools have reported that students scored at or above national averages in eight grades in 1988, compared to six grades in 1987, test score patterns actually vary markedly for black, white, Hispanic, and Asian students. Specifically:

- Scores for black students:
 - Met or exceeded national norms in three grades in 1987, four in 1988;
 - Increased seven grades in 1988;
 - Dropped in two grades.

- Scores for white students:
 - Met or exceeded national norms in all grades in both 1987 and 1988;
 - Increased in nine grades;
 - Dropped in one grade.
- Scores for Hispanic students:
 - Failed to meet the national average in any grade in 1988, compared to 1987 when scores matched the national average in one grade;
 - Increased in five grades in 1988;
 - Dropped in four grades.
- Scores for Asian students:
 - Met or exceeded national average scores in six grades in 1988, eight in 1987;
 - Increased in seven grades in 1988;
 - Dropped in three grades.

Clearly, all groups have not experienced improvements equally. A closer look indicates only that reading scores for some groups in some grades have increased, and that improvements for some groups are outpacing those of others. Moreover, Boston's improvements are occurring in relation to an "average" that is several years out of date, a fact that has called into question the validity of standardized testing nationwide.¹

Table 1 summarizes Boston's 1987 and 1988 Metropolitan Reading Test Scores by grade and by race.

2. *In both 1987 and 1988, differences in reading scores between black and white, Hispanic and white, and Asian and white students widen as students move from grade to grade.*

For example, by the end of the fifth grade, differences are not much wider, and are sometimes narrower, than they are in the first and second grades. However, by the time students graduate, differences have widened considerably. While white twelfth graders scored at the 61st percentile in 1987 and at the 67th percentile in 1988, their black, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts scored at the 34th, 27th, and 27th percentiles respectively in 1987 and at the 34th, 32nd, and 46th percentiles in 1988.

TABLE 1
BOSTON METROPOLITAN READING SCORES BY RACE
(1987 and 1988)

GRADE	BLACK		WHITE		HISPANIC		ASIAN	
	1987	1988	1987	1988	1987	1988	1987	1988
1	51	46	71	72	47	44	56	63
2	48	50	68	70	50	48	60	50
3	46	47	62	67	46	47	57	54
4	52	52	66	68	48	48	61	61
5	51	50	67	67	43	45	56	58
6	46	50	62	67	41	39	57	54
7	42	45	67	70	31	38	42	45
8	41	43	67	70	27	34	48	48
9	39	46	74	77	35	33	35	54
10	35	40	65	71	35	35	44	51
11	31	31	64	64	31	31	35	45
12	34	34	61	67	27	32	27	46

* The national average is based on 1985 Metropolitan Scores nationwide and is set as the 50th percentile. Numbers reflect how Boston students compare with the national average.

Even in 1988 when test scores improved, the pattern of widening differences remained unchanged. In 1988, scores for black students showed a decline of 16 points and scores for Hispanic students a decline of 13 points between fifth and twelfth grades. Scores for Asian students dropped 12 points in the same period, but scores showed no decline for white students. It is the decline in scores for black, Hispanic, and Asian students coupled with level scores for white students that creates such large differences.

The decline in scores is difficult to interpret given Boston's failure to look at the history of scores for individual students over time. On the face of it, however, it is certainly alarming considering that by twelfth grade nearly half of all black students and over half of all Hispanic students have dropped out of school. On one hand, this combination of factors may suggest that it is the higher-scoring students from these groups who are withdrawing from school. On the other hand, such declines may reflect the inability of Boston schools

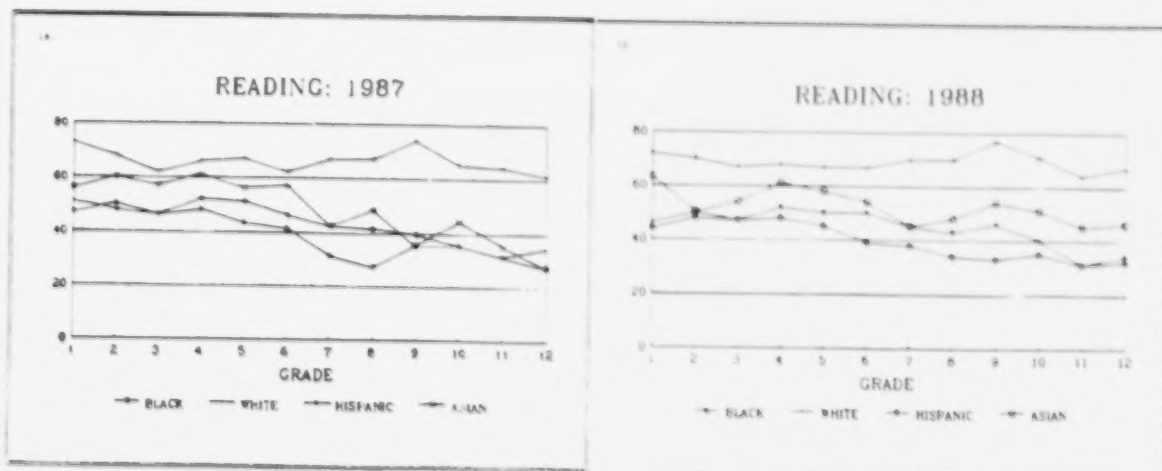
to maintain students' achievement in the middle and high school grades.

A steady drop in test scores for black and Hispanic students in particular is also likely to be symptomatic of the extent to which these students disproportionately experience school practices that work to their disadvantage and systematically slow their achievement. Non-promotion, suspension, misplacement in special education, and tracking are negative experiences which accumulate disproportionately in the school lives of black and Hispanic students in Boston. They may well act as brakes to the achievement of these groups, aggravating a disabling process of which grade-by-grade test score declines for these groups is a dramatic consequence.

Figures 1a and 1b summarize grade-by-grade test score patterns by race for 1987 and 1988.

3. The gaps between test scores for white and black and for white and Hispanic students in Boston increased between 1987 and 1988.

Figure 1
MET TEST SCORES BY RACE



Test score increases for the system overall mask widening differences among groups. The difference added for all grades can be expressed as a "loss of parity" from one year to the next.

From 1987 to 1988, black students experienced a "loss" of 16 points. The loss is even more significant for Hispanic students who appear to be increasingly left behind with a net "loss" of 21 points. Scores for Asian students, on the other hand, gained parity with scores for white students for an overall "gain" of 15 points, owed largely to test score increases in the high school grades.

Specifically:

- For black students:
 - Differences have widened in eight out of twelve grades;
 - Differences have narrowed in one grade.
- For Hispanic students:
 - Differences have widened in eight grades;
 - Differences have narrowed in three grades.
- For Asian students:
 - Differences have widened in five grades;
 - Differences have narrowed in six grades.

Table 2 summarizes test score point differences between scores for white and black, white and Hispanic, and white and Asian students for 1987 and 1988. Differences appear most dramatically in the seventh grade between white and black and between white and Asian students; gaps widen even earlier for Hispanic students. These widening gaps, greater in 1988 than in 1987, suggest that Boston's improvement in test scores is not experienced equally by all groups and is not grounded in fundamental change.

4. *Improvements in test scores mask patterns of steady movement of scores out of the two highest scoring quintiles and into the two lowest scoring quintiles.*

In both 1987 and 1988, a higher percentage of students score in the top 2/5 than in the bottom 2/5 of all test-taking students until seventh grade. However, in seventh grade, the situation begins to change, and by tenth grade less than 40 percent of all test-takers score at the 60th percentile or better, while more than 40 percent score in the bottom two quintiles.

Visually, the distribution and movement of test scores in Boston looks like a two-humped camel, its rear hump growing increasingly higher as its front hump shrinks. However, this pattern varies considerably for different groups. Figures 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2d illustrate this shift from the elementary grades to the high school grades.

Table 3 describes the movement of student scores into the lower percentiles and out of the higher percentiles for 1988 by race. For example, in 1988:

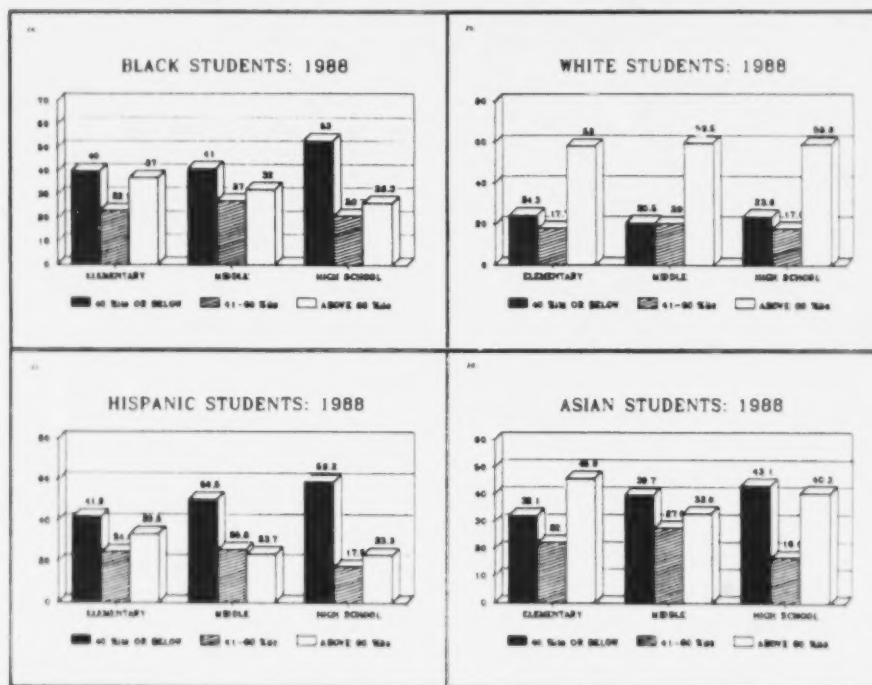
- For black test-taking students:
 - In the elementary grades, scores at each end of the distribution range are almost equal, with 40.0

TABLE 2

BOSTON MAT READING SCORES: MEDIAN POINT DIFFERENCES
(1987 and 1988)

GRADE	WHITE/BLACK		WHITE/HISPANIC		WHITE/ASIAN	
	1987	1988	1987	1988	1987	1988
1	22	26	26	28	15	9
2	20	20	18	22	8	20
3	16	20	16	20	5	13
4	14	16	18	20	5	7
5	16	17	24	22	11	9
6	16	17	21	28	5	13
7	25	25	36	32	25	25
8	26	27	40	36	19	22
9	35	31	39	44	39	23
10	30	31	30	36	21	20
11	33	33	33	33	29	19
12	27	33	34	35	34	21

Figure 2
MET READING SCORE DISTRIBUTION



percent scoring at the 40th percentile or below and 37.1 percent scoring at the 60th percentile or above;

– By twelfth grade, however, the “camel’s humps” have shifted, with over half (56.3 percent) scoring in the bottom percentiles and less than one-quarter (22.5 percent) scoring in the top percentiles.

- For white test-taking students:
 - Slightly under one quarter score at the 40th percentile or below at all levels;
 - Nearly six out of every 10 students score in the top two quintiles at all levels;
- For Hispanic test-taking students:
 - While approximately two out of five Hispanic test-takers in the elementary grades score at the 40th percentile or lower, by high school, nearly three out of five have moved into this category;
 - At the same time, scores for Hispanic students move out of the higher percentiles, with one-third scoring in this category in the elementary grades compared to only slightly more than one-fifth (21.9 percent) by twelfth grade.

- For Asian test-taking students:

– Scores move steadily into the lowest two quintiles from level to level, with 32.1 percent falling into the 40th percentile or below in the elementary grades, increasing to 43.1 percent in this category by high school;

– The percentage of Asian test-takers scoring in the top two quintiles drops dramatically between the elementary grades, when 45.8 percent score in this category, and the middle grades, when 32.8 percent score in this category.

For Boston educators, parents, students, policy-makers, and citizens, it should not be enough that test scores have risen. It is essential to analyze the way test scores are distributed in order to compare how the distribution of scores in the bottom percentiles compare to their distribution in the top percentiles. Current patterns suggest that Boston schools neither prevent lower-scoring students from falling further behind nor maintain higher-scoring black, Hispanic, and Asian students at scores they achieve in

the early grades, at a cost both to the students and the system as a whole.

Figures 3a, 3b, 3c, and 3d clarify the movement of 1988 reading scores for black, white, Hispanic, and Asian students from level to level within each percentile category.

5. *Based on test score patterns, some Boston students appear to lose ground earlier in their schooling than other groups.*

Specifically:

- For black students:

- In seventh grade, the numbers of lowest-scoring students increase sharply and continue to increase through eleventh grade;

- In seventh grade, the numbers of test taking black students scoring in the highest percentiles drop sharply and, while increasing again slightly in the eighth and ninth grades, drop again dramatically in the tenth and eleventh grades.

- For white students:

- In all grades, the number of students in the lowest percentiles never exceeds 30 percent of all test-taking white students with ranges of 28.6 percent in first grade to 19.7 percent in the sixth grade;

- In every grade, over half of white test-taking students score in the highest percentiles, never dropping below 54.3 percent.

- For Hispanic students:

- In fifth grade, the percentage of lowest-scoring students begins to increase and continues to increase steadily, with a dramatic jump in the seventh grade, slow-

ing only slightly through the high school grades;

- The percentage of test-taking students with scores in the highest percentiles drops steadily from fourth grade through eighth grade and again in tenth and eleventh grades, reaching the lowest percentage for all groups;

- For Asian students:

- The percentage of test-taking students scoring in the lowest percentiles increases steadily from the fifth grade through the eighth grade, with the sharpest jump in the seventh grade, and with increases

TABLE
DISTRIBUTION OF READING SCORES BY GRADE AND RACE
(1988)

Percentile	BLACK		WHITE		HISPANIC		ASIAN		ALL	
	40% or below	60% or above	40% or below	60% or above	40% or below	60% or above	40% or below	60% or above	40% or below	60% or above
Grade 1	43.9	38.9	28.6	59.7	47.3	37.1	31.1	52.2	39.8	44.5
Grade 2	38.2	37.6	21.0	58.5	39.3	33.9	29.6	34.7	33.3	42.9
Grade 3	44.2	34.7	26.4	56.0	42.4	36.3	41.2	43.9	39.3	41.0
Grade 4	36.6	37.9	23.3	58.0	38.8	32.0	28.6	31.3	32.9	43.1
Grade 5	35.3	34.7	21.5	56.0	40.8	37.9	30.8	42.9	32.2	39.7
Grades 1 - 5	40.0	37.0	24.3	58.0	41.8	33.5	32.1	45.8	35.7	42.4
Grade 6	36.0	35.3	19.7	57.1	40.9	25.5	31.1	25.5	34.1	39.4
Grade 7	43.0	29.0	21.6	57.0	52.1	23.2	44.5	39.6	38.9	36.6
Grade 8	44.7	31.6	20.1	63.7	58.1	22.3	44.0	39.3	39.0	40.4
Grades 6 - 8	41.0	32.0	20.5	59.5	50.5	23.7	39.7	32.8	37.3	38.8
Grade 9	44.3	33.9	21.8	63.1	58.7	25.8	41.0	42.5	39.7	41.8
Grade 10	52.1	25.1	23.7	57.8	57.0	23.1	41.2	41.6	44.1	35.2
Grade 11	61.8	21.8	27.5	54.3	61.6	22.1	45.9	39.9	50.2	33.3
Grade 12	56.3	22.5	21.7	56.9	60.2	21.8	43.3	36.4	44.7	33.3
Grades 9 - 12	53.0	26.3	23.6	55.8	59.2	23.3	43.1	40.3	44.3	36.6

occurring again in the tenth and eleventh grades;

— The percentage of test-taking students scoring in the highest percentiles drops in the fifth and sixth grades, with the most dramatic drop in sixth grade; these scores show some recovery in grades seven through ten but decline again in the eleventh and twelfth grades;

— In every middle grade, as well as in the eleventh and twelfth grades, more test-taking Asian students score in the lower percentiles than in the higher percentiles.

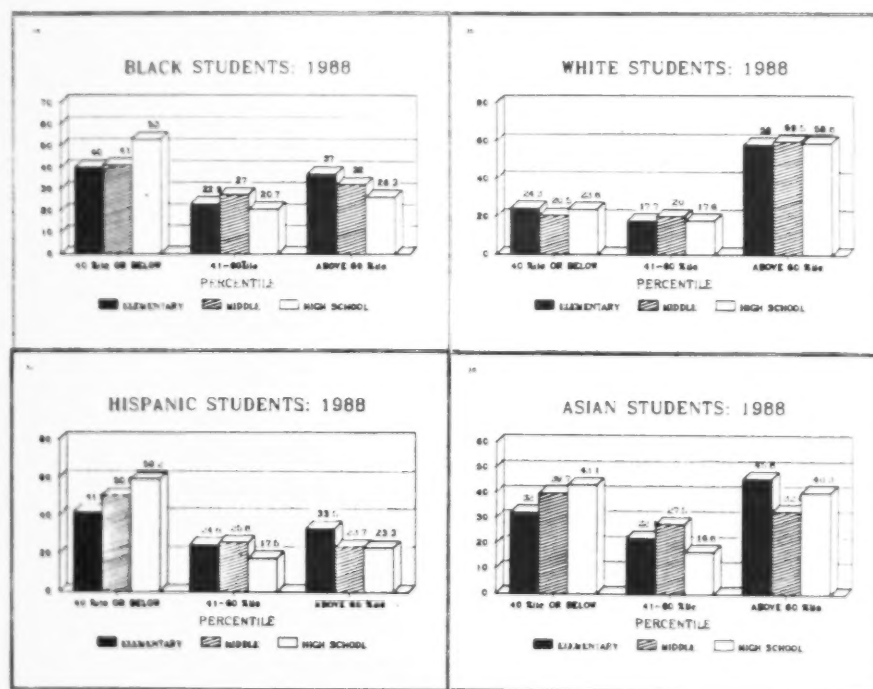
Figures 4a, 4b, 4c, and 4d summarize the pattern of movement of scores into the lower percentiles grade by grade.

These data have specific implications. First, the drop in high-scoring students and the increase in low-scoring stu-

dents are indications that conventional approaches in the early grades may meet the demands of the test but are not succeeding in establishing a foundation for later reading development. While students may be grasping a discreet, defined set of skills associated with reading in the early grades, they are not being coached in putting together the wide and varied range of skills that is reading itself. Failure to establish this foundation in the early grades means that Boston will continue to feed its remedial programs with more and more students in each passing grade.

By the same token, by the end of eighth grade, large numbers of test-taking students score below the 40th percentile, a pattern suggesting that conventional middle grades approaches—far from being “tried

Figure 3
MET READING DISTRIBUTION



and true"—are also failing to meet students' needs. Indeed, traditional routines in the middle grades may well be contributing to the widening of gaps between the numbers of higher-scoring and lower-scoring students in Boston. In particular, the dramatic slide of black, Hispanic, and Asian students into the lower-scoring percentiles in the seventh grade indicates that teaching and organizational strategies in the seventh grade in particular and middle grades in general need fundamental rethinking.

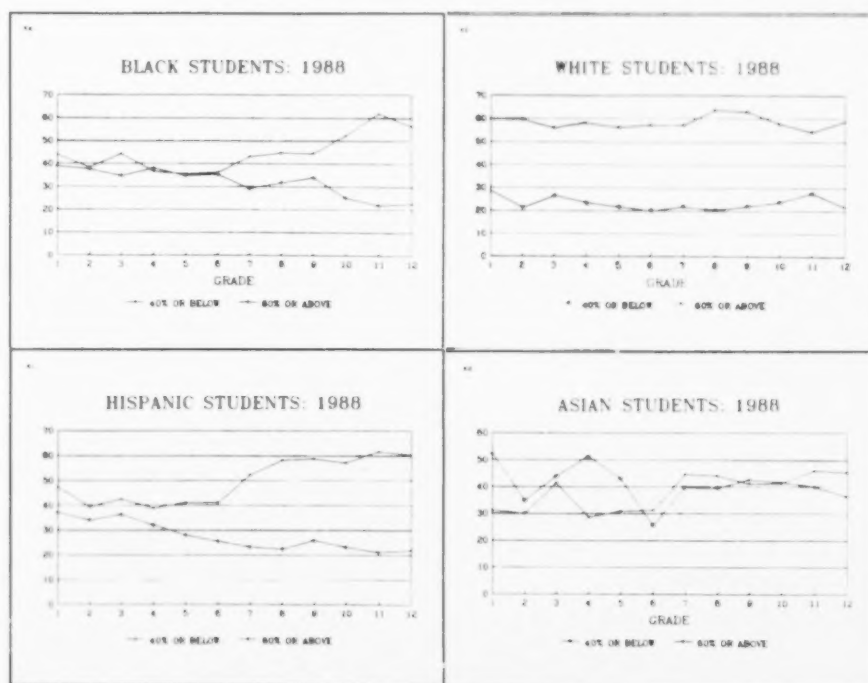
Test Scores: What Do They Really Tell Us About Reading?

Test score improvements in Boston, while widely publicized, have not actually provided the public with any more informa-

tion about students' reading abilities than was previously known. Because the scores themselves are compared to a norm established in 1986, scores are less and less meaningful as time goes on. Moreover, higher scores do not necessarily mean better skills. Often they mean only greater familiarity with the test on the part of the teachers—who may "teach to the test"—and of the students.

In a *Boston Globe* article of June 21, 1988, school officials openly expressed the "general expectation that scores will rise because the same version of the Metropolitan test has been recycled for years." And in our own interviews with students, when asked about the content of the tests, fourteen-year-old "Rosa" replied, "It's the same stories again and again." Likewise, thirteen-year-old "Peter" said the test asked "the same things every year. [It had the] same

Figure 4
1988 READING SCORE DISTRIBUTION



stories as last year but just longer. Boring stuff about bees."

Likewise, scores provide little information about what may be happening at the school level and in the classroom to encourage and develop students as competent life-long readers and learners. Just as on a general level scores do not measure critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, or the ability to work cooperatively with others, on a more reading-specific level they do not measure overall comprehension ability or students' attitudes toward reading, including their motivation to use books to search for information, love of language, or leisure-reading habits. These are all reasonable goals for our public schools, but test scores tell us little about how well we are meeting them.

Indeed, we suspect an improvement in test scores hides a deeper failure to meet these broad educational goals. Although the students we interviewed claimed they liked to read (when asked outright), few used their neighborhood library, and few read during their summer vacation or in their free time. Perhaps since much of what they read in school is not, according to their own description, very enjoyable, they seldom come to think of reading as an enjoyable experience.

Moreover, by placing such inordinate emphasis on scores, we risk communicating to our students the message that the score itself is more important than what it is supposed to measure. For example, students we interviewed tended to say they were good readers if they received high test scores and high grades:

Interviewer: Do you think you're pretty good at reading?

"Benjamin" (age 13, in the eighth grade): Yeah, I get A's.

"Jimmy" (age 13, in the fifth grade): Yes. My report card says so.

"Alvin" (age 13, in the fifth grade): Not so good. [My] grades aren't so good.

Indeed, some students seemed to equate learning with the accumulation of

good grades:

Interviewer: Are you a good reader?

Martin (age 10, in the fourth grade): Pretty good.

Interviewer: How do you know?

Martin: My grades are pretty good. One of these days I might get to college if I get a lot of good grades.

Interviewer: You mean if you learn a lot?

Martin: Yeah, if I get a lot of good grades.

Interviews with students also revealed a strange confusion in the way schools communicate the importance of reading to their students. On one hand, many students report that teachers encourage them to read. They know they are supposed to like to read, and some do. On the other hand, these messages are not always carried out consistently. For example, many students report they have limited access to their school library. All seventeen students interviewed indicated they are allowed to visit the library only during the time assigned to their class—generally once every one to two weeks—and that in some schools, library use is restricted to the Advanced Work Class.

Further, most students reported the school library is used primarily as a forum for guest speakers. When asked whether she ever would visit the library just to read or pick out a book, "Monica," a 14-year-old seventh grader who attends school in East Boston, replied, "No. It's really only for when people come in to talk." Likewise, although "José," a fourth grader from Jamaica Plain, said he sometimes goes to his neighborhood library "to pick up a nice book—a hard book," he affirmed that he visits the library in his school only to "see movies and shows." And in some schools, while students are allowed to take their workbooks home, they also report that teachers do not trust them to take home the textbooks themselves, even when they are necessary to complete workbook assignments. Such experiences convey mixed signals, at best, about schools' expectations for student reading.

Assessing and Ranking of Schools: An Abuse of Test Scores

While reports of test score improvements tend to mask more persistent and troubling reading patterns among Boston students, use of test scores to assess and rank schools is a flagrant abuse of the testing process. Standardized tests such as the Metropolitan Achievement Tests were never designed to assess school performance. Despite this fact, the Boston school system, pushed by the Boston Compact, has committed the schools to test score improvements as if higher test scores could be equated with school improvement. Used in this way, test scores present an extremely narrow window on school life.

Schools are not alike in their student populations. Some schools, for example, have Advanced Work Classes, and scores of students in these classes inevitably raise those schools' standing overall. Moreover, while certain bilingual and special education students are exempt from testing, some schools insist that these students take the tests while others do not. Finally, while schools are required to test students who are absent on testing days, the implementation of this policy varies from school to school. And even if the test-takers in each school were roughly equal, who is to say whether upper grades schools do not benefit or lose according to the performance of their feeder schools?

One aspect of difference in the test-taking population is that the percentage of students enrolled who actually take the tests varies dramatically from school to school. In Boston's middle schools, for example, two schools—the Rogers and the Wheatley—tested over three-quarters of their population in 1988. The same year, two schools—the Dearborn and the Lewenberg—tested less than half of their enrolled students. In the remaining middle schools, an average of 64 percent of all students were tested. Clearly, test scores from these schools can hardly reflect how well the school is serving all its students.

The ranking of schools does not account for test score distribution and may favor certain schools when higher-scoring students make improvements. By the same token, ranking presents only a partial and misleading picture of a school's performance. For example, in ranking Boston's middle schools according to 1988 reading test scores, Boston Public Schools rated the Holmes School in third place.² However, when scores for sixth graders at the Holmes are eliminated to neutralize the effect of Advanced Work Class scores, data show that nearly one-quarter (23.5 percent) of the school's seventh and eighth grade test-takers score at the 20th percentile or below, actually placing the school thirteenth out of 21 schools.

Ronald Edmonds has argued that "Schools can not be judged effective if a significant portion of the pupil population fails to demonstrate mastery."³ Given this standard, we must push all schools to succeed with all students. Test scores and test score rankings too frequently mask the inequity of real achievement in a school. The use of test scores to rank schools can seriously misrepresent schools' performance to parents and the public.

In his discussion of assessing school performance, Stanford University educator Edward Haertel has written, "When the focus shifts from improving schooling quality to improving a school's statistics, the validity of those statistics as indicators of quality may be compromised."⁴ In the case of test scores, their quality as indicators is already suspect. Test scores do not reveal how schools educate students with special needs, respond to different learning paces of different students, develop alternatives to non-promotion, create positive school discipline programs, establish a school climate free of racial prejudice, design approaches to involve parents in their children's learning, foster artistic creativity, or collaborate with human service programs. These characteristics may be more significant than test scores in assess-

ing how well a school both challenges and nurtures all its students, yet the contribution such components make to overall educational quality and academic achievement is lost in the equation of higher scores with better education.

When Testing Becomes the Curriculum

At the same time, the school staff's awareness that schools will be ranked by test scores can distort teaching in such a way as to undermine real learning and school improvement. A wide range of recent publications and studies have concluded that an over-valuing of test scores has reduced the curriculum to fragments of information to be taught and memorized.⁵ As testing assumes greater importance, teachers focus increasingly on communicating bits of information to their students rather than on designing activities that deepen students' commitment to learning and help them generate their own knowledge. Indeed, under such circumstances many creative teachers actually choose to leave the classroom rather than narrow their curricular focus and abandon their commitment to student-centered teaching.⁶

In short, one result of an inordinate emphasis on test scores and the confusion of higher test scores with improved reading is that school becomes more boring for both teachers and students. Frequently, teachers may experience pressure to "teach to the test," with classroom instruction in reading increasingly coming to resemble the tests themselves. According to George F. Madaus of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College: "In reading class, students, using commercial materials, read dozens of little paragraphs about which they then answer questions. The materials they use are more and more designed to look exactly like the tests they will take in the spring."⁷

This pattern appears to be common in Boston according to students we inter-

viewed. In many classrooms, material for reading seems to be drawn exclusively from, in the words of a student we interviewed, "a big textbook with stories and comprehension questions after each story." "Jorge," a 14-year-old seventh grader from Roxbury described reading instruction in his Language Arts class as "boring. You read paragraphs and answer questions." And 13-year-old "Chris" from South Boston, also in the seventh grade, complained that the stories in the textbook are, "too easy. It would be a good story and then it would end too quick. They're too short." The stories—often merely a couple of paragraphs the students read in class—are short because those on the standardized tests are short. Rarely are students given entire books to read.

Indeed, much of the curriculum in "reading"—English or Language Arts—couldn't qualify as "reading" at all. In our interviews, students noted that worksheets and vocabulary drills often take the place of "real reading" in school. "In English," complained 13-year-old "Jonathan," an eighth grader in South Boston, "we do parts of speech, we write letters and stuff. Not much reading." Similarly "Drew," a 15-year-old tenth grader reported, "We don't read much in Language Arts. We learn about metaphors and similes and stuff."

Likewise, "Monica" had much to say on the subject of reading instruction in her school:

We have U.S.S.R., twenty minutes at the end of the day, but mostly it's 'packs' (packets of worksheets)—phonics, spelling, that stuff. It's so boring! Reading is supposed to be reading. But we never really do reading. We do 'packs'—vocabulary words, sounds, spelling, and dictionary work. But I don't think our reading class should be called 'reading.'

Skills such as spelling, punctuation, phonics, and decoding are clearly important and have a central role in the instruction of reading; but they are merely *parts* of the reading process. They should not be equated with reading itself.

Just as classroom reading instruction has come to mimic reading tests, remediation programs have been designed to remediate to the test. "Monica" used to go to a Chapter One remedial reading class in which students "read along to tape cassettes and answered questions." "But we never got to read the stuff by ourselves or out loud," she lamented. Likewise, "Drew" currently attends a Chapter One remedial class where the instruction centers upon, as he put it, "Basic things. Even if you know how to do it already, they make you do it again—learn it again. It's boring." And "Carlos," a 14-year-old eighth grader from Jamaica Plain described his after-school remedial class as

much too easy. They give you baby stuff—books with big words [i.e. typeface]. And so short! Three sentences would make a whole story. I get mad because I read fast and they [are] so short. It's boring! And the questions—so simple! Big words [typeface], you know, like for old people—or for baby books.

According to Judith Davidson and David Koppenhaver in their study *Adolescent Literacy: What Works and Why*:

Although practice is necessary to become adept at any new skill or in a new subject students in remedial classes actually read very little. When they do read, they are generally given words in isolation or short passages taken out of context; hence these students seldom have the chance to read stories that develop character, plot, or setting in exciting or varied ways, nor are they exposed to nonfiction writing of quality and depth. It is no wonder that many lack a basic understanding of the purposes and functions of literacy.⁸

It appears that students' experiences in Boston's remedial programs are no better or worse than those described by researchers nationally. However, this should provide little consolation for those who care about reading instruction and learning in Boston schools. Far from offering real challenges to students, Boston's remedial programs appear to be "dumbed down" to meet the lowest expectations of performance.

Yet this is not to condemn all remedial reading programs. After failing her final exam in reading this spring, "Monica" attended a summer school program at her school which she enthusiastically hailed as, "better than regular classes—a lot funner. Not 'packs' over and over again." In contrast to the impoverished reading curriculum of the school year and her Chapter One class, summer school provided "Monica" with the opportunity for, as she put it, "real reading." What did she read? "Mostly novels. *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, *Blubber*, *Sweet Valley*, *Last Chance*. A whole lot of books. You don't want to know all of them." They were the kind of books she most enjoyed reading: "about problems; people my age and their problems—you know."

"Monica's" experience seems to confirm the finding of researchers Davidson and Koppenhaver that teaching reading by reading is a highly effective instructional method.⁹ Clearly, Boston must begin to redesign remedial approaches to conform to this finding, even if test score increases are not an immediate outcome.

Assessing Student Progress:

If this is May,

It Must be "MET" Time

It is impossible to grasp fully the extent to which standardized testing dominates the curriculum in Boston schools. However, a review of Boston's testing schedule provides some hint of the role of testing in the school year.

- In October, students in grades 3, 6, and 9 take the Massachusetts State Basic Skills Tests in reading, mathematics, and writing to fulfill state mandates for minimal competency testing;
- In January, students in grades 5, 8, and 12 take the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) tests mandated by Boston's Promotion Policy to determine promotion from grades 5, 8, and 12;
- In March and April, students in grades 4, 8, and 12 take Massachusetts Curriculum

Assessment Tests in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies to fulfill state mandates for the assessment of a broad curriculum;

- In May, students in grades 1-12 take the Metropolitan Achievement Tests in reading and mathematics;
- In May, students in grades 4, 7, and 11 take the DRP tests to assess their reading comprehension levels; at the same time, students in grades 5, 8, and 12 who failed to meet DRP cutoff scores in January, re-take DRP tests to determine promotion from grade;
- In June, students in grades K-12 take Boston's own Curriculum Referenced Tests (CRTs) in reading/language arts, mathematics, science social studies, foreign languages, English as a Second Language, and Computer Education to assess students' mastery of curriculum objectives.

Considering the sheer volume of the tests the students must take, it should not be surprising that most students we interviewed have virtually no idea what purpose each test serves. For example, many interviewees believed the Metropolitan test was used to determine promotion from grade, while some said it only indicated what reading level they would be on next year. Most students, however, admitted they didn't know *what* the tests were for, or why they were given.

Even on the face of it, Boston's testing schedule is likely to have a significant impact on both students and teachers. In the name of holding schools accountable, mandated testing seeks an objective measure of student performance. However, recent research from the Center for the Study of Evaluation at UCLA found that over-reliance on standardized testing may actually reduce the frequency of classroom assessment and feedback to students.¹⁰ This finding is alarming given the importance of frequent and direct feedback to effective classroom learning and teaching. Yet when the stakes are high—as they are in Boston where graduation and promotion

from some grades depend on achieving certain cut-off scores—the assessment examination is likely to become “what matters,” and teacher judgment is likely to be devalued.

Experts on testing argue that tests can be a valuable teacher's aid—but should be used as an *aid* only. Madaus warns that the tests should not be allowed to function as a “surrogate teacher.” He asserts that:

Test results, when used in conjunction with other data about pupil performance, can help educators make educationally sound decisions about their pupils. But it is the educators using all available information including tests who must make these decisions; they should not be made mechanically solely on the basis of a test score.¹¹

The students seem to agree. When asked what other ways schools could evaluate students' reading besides by administering standardized tests, many interviewees suggested that their teacher(s) could sit with them while they read, listen to them, and ask them questions to stimulate discussion. Others indicated their teachers should be able to evaluate students' reading solely on the basis of their experience with them during the school year. “Ramón,” a 12-year-old fifth grader, put it simply: “The teacher knows.”

Mandated tests have a tendency to communicate the message articulated by Arthur E. Wise, director of the Center for the Study of the Teaching Profession of the Rand Corporation: “Don't teach everything, just teach the basics. Don't teach children to read, just teach reading skills. Don't teach children to write, just teach them to fill in the blanks. Don't teach them to think, just teach them the right answers.”¹² Standardized testing does have a role in public education, but Boston's testing schedule combined with the confusion of standardized test scores with the quality of Boston schools have created a situation that demands that educational and community leaders rethink how student progress is assessed.

Test Scores and Student Success: Putting Life Chances in Perspective

Students' competence in reading, writing, and computing should be a matter of concern, not just for our schools, but for Boston as a whole. The city desperately needs citizens who can use information to improve their lives, solve problems in their neighborhoods, teach the next generation important skills, and perform jobs that need doing. But scores on standardized tests provide only a minimal understanding about students' real preparation for the future. Indeed, Madaus emphasizes, "Passing a state-mandated test is no guarantee of anything, let alone real life success. It's a lot easier to fail a test than it is to fail in life."¹³

By the same token, high scores do not necessarily predict success, particularly if they do not result in high school completion. A summary of earnings of young people by sex, high school graduation status, and level of academic skills included in a recent Ford Foundation report showed that while those with better skills do earn more, earnings are also dependent on the level of educational attainment and gender. For examples, males, both graduates and dropouts—except for male dropouts whose scores fall in the lowest quintile—outearn all females, whether graduates or dropouts. Within each basic skill percentile category, graduates consistently earn more than dropouts.¹⁴

Nor do higher test scores necessarily prevent dropping out. A recent Chicago study found that students who were overage for their grade, including students reading at higher levels than their grade appropriate peers, were more likely than students with lower scores in age-appropriate grades to drop out of school.¹⁵ Clearly, high test scores do not always act as a buffer against harmful school practices which can have a powerful impact on life chances.

Basic skills certainly have great bearing on students' future opportunities, but high school completion is clearly as

important as basic skills mastery in options for young people. For this reason, policies that tie students' chances for grade promotion and graduation to a single score on a single standardized test seriously jeopardize students' futures. While it is the responsibility of our schools to prepare students for increasingly complex learning assignments, schools do neither their students nor the community a service by refusing promotion or graduation to students on the basis of a test score alone.

Recommendations for Change

Test score improvements in Boston mask real concerns about student achievement patterns and have stifled full discussion about the role of standardized testing, school improvement, and school accountability in Boston Public Schools. Based on findings presented from testing data and interviews with students in this *Status Report*, the Center's recommendations apply to all Boston grades but focus primarily on the middle grades where test scores indicate the need to address serious learning difficulties becomes more urgent:

Remediation

- *Each school should establish a reading committee of staff and students to design remedial programs and to promote all approaches likely to enhance real reading competence among students.*

Remediation should focus on development of a broad range of language skills geared toward helping students read and enjoy whole books, understand complex information, incorporate reading into their daily lives, communicate what they read to others, and reflect on information, characters, and meanings of stories as they pertain to their own lives. Test preparation should not be emphasized at the expense of real reading instruction.

In particular, each committee should work to make consistent the school's messages about reading. Libraries should be

open and staffed before, during, and after school. Students should be allowed to take books home with them. Linkages should be established with city libraries and bookstores. Test score improvement as a goal should be secondary to improving reading habits, attitudes, and abilities among all students.

- *All language arts programs at the middle level should be developmentally in tune with the learning needs of young adolescent students.*

Approaches should account for students' needs for diversity, interaction with peers and adults, participation in school and community activities, and opportunities to develop self-esteem and individual identity and should also recognize the wide range of cognitive abilities typical of early adolescence. Middle level reading and remedial approaches should emphasize active, experiential, cooperative learning activities designed to help students move from concrete to abstract thinking skills. Materials should be of high interest to young adolescents including those mentioned by students themselves: STAR newspaper; dirt bike magazines; adventure, romance, and mystery novels; "hard books—books about science, racing cars, trains, and detective stories;" and "history books—books about the Vietnam War and World Wars I and II."

Students also suggested that schools could stimulate them to read by having more schoolwide reading contests such as reading marathons, by letting them read in groups with their friends, and by helping them make their own books. Above all, students should be encouraged to read entire books in programs that are truly different from "business as usual." Some such programs already exist in Boston, including the Mackey School's Discovery Academy, the bookmobile at the Timilty School, the Lewenberg's "reading dragon," and the summer program at the Thompson Island Education Center. Such efforts should be supported and expanded.

- *Hispanic students should be ensured full access to all remedial programs in Boston.*

Whether or not students are enrolled in bilingual programs, they should have opportunities to participate fully in "extra-help" programs already working in the system including Compact Ventures, Project Promise, RECAP, and alternative education placements. These programs, as well as regular education, should recognize research that highlights the value of strengthening students' capability in their home language as a foundation for strengthening English language skills. The high rate of Hispanic test-taking students falling below the 40th percentile by the middle grades suggests the approach to remediation for Hispanic students must be both deep and far-reaching.

Moreover, remedial programs for Hispanic youngsters should be appropriate to the cultural context of Hispanic students. Jim Cummins, a nationally known expert in bilingual education, has offered a four-component approach to enhancing the education of Hispanic students.¹⁶ He argues that teaching linguistic-minority students requires:

- Educators who see their role as adding rather than replacing skills so that students' culture is validated and affirmed;
- Inclusion of parents and others from students' own communities as partners in schools, a commitment requiring teachers to work with mother-tongue teachers or aides who can work in a non-condescending way with parents;
- Active learning strategies, including cooperative learning, in which language use and development is incorporated into every aspect of the curriculum;
- Assessment approaches that identify not only students' needs but also aspects of schooling which themselves disable students. Cummins argues that without these components, minority students are systematically disadvantaged by schools.

Based on Cummins' research, the Center recommends that *each school* first

assess its approach to Hispanic students according to criteria of cultural/linguistic affirmation, community/parent participation, teaching strategies, and assessment and, second, formulate a plan for addressing the needs of Hispanic students in each school based on this assessment. Court Street staff should immediately identify all schools without bilingual, bicultural staff and assign staff who can communicate effectively with parents, assess student needs, and advocate for Hispanic children. Until school officials ensure that all Spanish-speaking parents have access to the schools their children attend, Boston can not claim to be providing equal educational opportunity to Hispanic children.

Restructuring

- *Middle grades in all schools, including K-8 and 7-12 schools, should be restructured to reflect the most recent research concerning student achievement in the middle grades.*

The most important features of restructuring relate to classroom organization and grouping of students.

The Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools of the Johns Hopkins University has recently reported that the organization of sixth graders into self-contained classrooms for core subjects is a more effective learning structure for low-achieving students, and is no less effective than a departmentalized structure for high-achieving students.¹⁷ Moreover, CREMS has found that students with "low" reading/math scores score lower in tracked classes in middle schools.

These findings have direct implications for Boston's middle schools. CREMS' finding that "in middle schools, receiving instruction from fewer teachers is most clearly associated with greater achievement for students from low and low-middle social backgrounds," suggests that Boston should redesign its middle grades to reduce departmentalization. Ironically, the benefits of a self-contained classroom for sixth graders are already tacitly acknowledged in Boston's sixth grade Advanced Work Classes.

Retraining

- *Boston should make an on-going commitment to a strategic plan for professional development in the middle grades.*

The persistent pattern of learning loss that becomes dramatic in the middle grades is a clear signal that current practices at the middle level are not working. While the downturn in learning is rooted in part in school organizational features, it may also reflect a dramatic mismatch between student needs and current classroom practices to the detriment of the learning of young adolescents.

In recent years, several cities have embarked on ambitious professional development efforts designed to strengthen classroom teaching and learning. Pittsburgh, for example, similar in size to Boston, has begun to provide professional development to all teachers in the system. Pittsburgh's program, supported with initial funding from local businesses and the Ford Foundation to supplement the four-year Board of Education investment of ten million dollars, includes seminars in child and adolescent development and classroom management techniques, and training in teaching skills which research has proven successful. Self-assessment is a key component of the program. Begun at the high school level, it is expanding to include all teachers at the middle and elementary levels.¹⁸

In an effort focused specifically on improving middle grades education, the Rochester Public School system has begun a major professional development initiative with start-up funds from the Matsushita and Ford Foundations. Emphasizing that professional development is a crucial link in the process of restructuring middle schools to meet the needs of young adolescents, the foundation of the Rochester approach is the belief that

programs must enable staff to stay abreast of teaching practices that research has demonstrated to be effective and must provide staff with a mechanism that will encourage implementation. Professional development

should be viewed in the context of the continuing education of the professional; it is not optional, it is required; it is not an event, it is a process. The alternative to a systematic, dedicated effort to change teaching behaviors is the trial and error process of the past, whereby the professional after many years may or may not acquire teaching behaviors that are effective.¹⁹

Every aspect of the Rochester program is designed to enhance new and continuing program components of an overall restructuring of the middle grades. Building on peer coaching and collaboration as mechanisms for continual instructional improvement, the staff development program provides seminars in cooperative learning and home-based guidance for teachers and leadership training for school principals.

Both in Pittsburgh and in Rochester, the commitment to professional development is multi-year and institutionalized in school budgets. Without a similar effort in Boston, it is likely that students will continue to experience patterns of learning loss, particularly in the middle grades.

Rethinking

- *Boston should abandon the use of test scores to rank or compare schools.*

Publication of schools' test score ranking is not only intellectually dishonest but also feeds schools' tendency to teach—and to remediate—to the test. Any effort to increase school accountability and assess school improvement must build in a wide range of indicators that reflect the overall objectives of education, including strengthening students' communication and critical-thinking skills, enhancing citizenship skills, providing students with an understanding of math and science, and promoting occupational competence. As misleading and narrow measures of overall school effectiveness, test scores alone should never be used in efforts to improve school accountability.

- *Boston should abandon the policy of relying on a single score on a single standardized test for promotion or graduation.*

While this measure creates an impression of objectivity, it provides only false reassurance that students are prepared for their next grade level or have mastered specific skills.

Currently Boston's fifth, eighth, and twelfth graders must score at a specified level on the standardized DRP test for promotion or graduation. In 1990, DRP cut-off scores will be replaced by grade-level equivalent scores based on Metropolitan tests, and specific standards will apply to first grade promotion as well. This policy contradicts the best research on the appropriate use of test scores.

In addition, such a policy is likely to be especially harmful to young children. Indeed, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has recently opposed the use of standardized tests as the sole source for educational decisions.²⁰ Boston should, instead, base high-stakes decisions regarding promotion and graduation on multiple sources of information including teacher judgment, observations of parents and others, completion of course work, and demonstrations of competence through portfolios and special projects.

- *The Boston School Committee should commission an independent study on testing in Boston and develop a systemwide testing policy based on the findings.*

The study and policy should include attention to the following:

- Effects of standardized testing on classroom instructional practices and the curriculum;
- Potential burdening of the school year schedule with standardized testing;
- Validity of testing for children through age eight;
- Inflation of test scores;
- Alternatives to testing all students in every grade every year;
- The need for analyzing test scores of cohorts of specific students over time.

Each of these considerations is an essential piece of a policy designed to protect Boston students from harmful testing practices.

Conclusion

Test score improvements in Boston are a superficial measure of both student competence and school improvement. Reports of increases in average scores help neither educators nor the public better understand the needs of the system for purposes of designing approaches for real improvement. A comprehensive approach to improve achievement in Boston must include culturally and developmentally appropriate remediation, restructuring in the middle grades, and significant investment in professional development. Moreover, the system desperately needs an overall policy to guide decisions regarding standardized testing. As long as Boston continues to equate higher test scores with real school improvement, needed reforms will be delayed.

Notes

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(continued on next page)

Publications

The Massachusetts Advocacy Center has a longstanding commitment to public school reform efforts in the Commonwealth. Recent publications available from the Center include:

- ***Before It's Too Late: Dropout Prevention in the Middle Grades*** (\$9.00);
- ***Out of the Mainstream: The Education of Disabled Children in Massachusetts*** (\$6.00);
- ***The Way Out: Student Exclusion Practices in Boston Middle Schools*** (\$9.00);
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Massachusetts Advocacy Center

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